THE MYSTERY OF IT ALL
Luke 2:8-20
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I should like this morning to hold until last the best part of this sermon which is the account, in Luke's Gospel, of what happened after Jesus' birth. My real text is something St. Paul wrote in the introduction to a letter to the early Christian Church in Corinth..."Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this age?" There is no occasion in the year when the preacher feels that sentiment more intensely than at Christmas. On other Sundays we may be consummately logical, using our time in worship to explore, in the light of faith, the vexing concerns which occupy our society. Other occasions are employed to probe the theological complexities of the Gospel. But today - and the preacher knows it better than anyone else - everything goes out the window, the slate is wiped clean and we find ourselves confronted with an illogical, almost mythic tableaux: a strange star appearing in the East, and even stranger astrologer priests following it across the desert to Bethlehem: a choir of heavenly angels appearing out of nowhere on a hill just outside of town, singing a magnificent gloria to Almighty God: a motely band of rough, illiterate shepherds, scurrying across the quiet fields in holy terror and making their way to a shed back of an Inn: and a very young Galilean girl, married - or perhaps simply engaged to a Nazareth carpenter, - giving birth to a son right there in the hay with barnyard animals as witnesses, and then placing the swaddled child in a cow's feed box for his first nap. How in the world do you do anything with that story except tell it?

I have been reading several books recently on the craft of preaching and I was both comforted and distressed to discover this sharp paragraph by British theologian Colin Morris: "The man who launches himself from a tall building, flapping plywood wings, may be regarded by amused onlookers as a crank; in fact, his aim - to soar like a bird without outside propulsion - is child's play compared with the goal set for the preacher. There is more chance of splitting the atom with a feather duster than preaching an adequate sermon. Why? Because preaching is the attempt to communicate by the crude, inexact medium of words the essence of the ultimate mystery - God." (The Word and the Words, p.27).

Not that we haven't tried. Every person here has probably read an article or heard a sermon which tried to explain "what really happened": how Mary found herself pregnant and had to tell Joseph something and surprised even herself when he believed it: or how the star was really just the Morning Star shining particularly brightly, or a comet which appeared at about that time: or how the Magi read their astrological charts and discovered that a king was to be born, which is no more or less nonsense than you can find in the astrological column in today's newspaper, and quite by accident stumbled onto a new born in a stable: or how the shepherds were completely ignorant, totally unreliable, susceptible to the power of suggestion, and probably drunk: or, finally, how the whole story was simply fabricated seventy-five years after the fact by some very creative literary types who needed a proper introduction to the saga of the man they had come to believe was the Son of God.

The trouble is, no matter how responsible the effort to locate historic fact in the Christmas story, the result always leaves a bad taste in the mouth - like being overwhelmed with the beauty of a symphony concert and then reading the review in the morning paper and discovering that the second violins were sluggish and the oboe a little sharp.

We know exactly what David Read meant when he said one time that for the same reason he didn't want stained glass windows removed in order to see better in church, he really didn't want anyone trying to shed light on the Christmas story. He wrote: "I don't want someone to make the incarnation sound like the simplest and most natural thing in the world." (Curious Christians, p. 128). Christmas presents us with a bit of a mystery and efforts to reduce the mystery by explaining what actually happened are singularly unsatisfying.

Yet, we live in a world that does just that all the time. Part of the process of growing up and maturing is, in fact, the moving of data from one category called "mystery" to another category called "understanding". It's a good thing too: no one wants to go through life thinking that storks bring babies or that God cries when it rains. And yet, wistfully, we know that something very precious about us and human life, gets lost in that process. Little children love A.A.Milne's "Winnie the Pooh", but discerning adults love the stories even more, I think, because they are about wonder and mystery and innocent astonishment, and gentle love and all sorts of absurdities.

What happens to it? Is it inevitable or even right that we should lose the sense of mystery as a mark of our maturity? I don't think so. In fact, the more I think about it the more I'm ready to conclude that understanding aids and abets mystery instead of eliminating it. The existence of a tree is a great mystery to the botanist who knows the incredible and inexplicable processes of photosynthesis. The more I think about it the more I am convinced that while the first stage of maturing means moving a lot of data from the "mystery" category over into "understanding", the second stage is to move it back into "mystery" - where it belongs.

Halford Luccock wrote one time: "It is one of the strange paradoxes of our time that a world full of wonders has lost the sense of wonder. The two are quite different. We gape at a bewildering succession of marvelous machines, but there is little of the deep amazement felt on the Judean hills so long ago; 'When I consider the heavens, the work of thy hands, the moon and stars which thou has made; what is man that thou art mindful of him?' One reason why religion to so many becomes flat, stale and wearisome is that sheer wonder is left out." (A Sprig of Holly, p. 16).

Interestingly, as theologians and philosophers ponder the meaning of the Death of God phenomenon during the last decade many conclude that what died was not God but the human sense of mystery and the consequent ability to experience wonder.

Intellectually we are still living in the back waters of the Enlightenment that tremendous time in history, about the 18th century, when the human mind and spirit were finally released from the ignorance and superstition of the Dark Ages. Human Reason emerged as the arbiter of truth: the scientific method would guide human affairs: whether an idea was true or not would be decided on the empirical basis of whether or not it made sense. Religion followed suit: the mysteries of medieval Catholicism were countered by a coldly rational Protestantism. Theology reached for the mind, not the heart; Biblical studies attempted to explain the curious phenomena of the New Testament in reasonable terms, discarding as myth anything that refused to be explained. Thomas

Jefferson, a prototype Enlightenment thinker, actually rewrote the New Testament, leaving out everything he couldn't understand and retaining everything his reason told him might be true.

Frankly, that appeals to us. We don't own up to it much, but there is a lot about the Bible that assaults our common sense. We would like very much a religion that is logical. But admirable as that instinct is, in every other area, it conflicts with the very premise of religion; namely, that there is a God who exists outside the boundaries of human intellect: that God, if He is God, has created even the human mind: that He is essentially, and always will be, a mystery which is not accessible to our powers of reason.

One of the most fascinating and refreshing intellectual currents of our day, however, is coming from a new scientific sensitivity to mystery. As a matter of fact, scientists have never been as arrogant or confident about the supremacy of human reason as we lay people. We are the ones who bought, lock, stock and barrel, the notion that progress means the ultimate elimination of mystery. From their side of it, no less an authority than Albert Einstein once said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed."

And sociologist, Russell Gordon Smith - "The scientific mood does not hold that the truths it enables men to discover are the only truths...The scientist knows too well that behind the symbols of mathematics and the formulae of chemistry...lie the unexplained mysteries of twilight and music, of autumn nights fringed with silence, of human fortitude and idealism." (See Howard Thurman, The Mood of Christmas, p. 8).

The scientists, of all people, are leading us back to mystery. The New York Times Book Review two weeks ago covered three new publications which address the matter of astronomy and basic philosophical or religious questions. The article suggested that "astronomers have replaced priests as the official answerers of the great question,- 'Where did everything come from?'" and concludes that the scientist's answer turns out curiously similar to the priest's. One of the authors, Professor Robert Jastrow, is quoted: "The details differ, but the essential elements in the astronomical and Biblical accounts of Genesis are the same: the chain of events leading to man commenced suddenly and sharply, at a definite moment in time, in a flash of light and energy."

Now that, frankly, is incredible. Intellectuals, fifty years ago, simply would not have believed that a scientist - an astronomer - could say such things. After several centuries of apologizing for Genesis, we find ourselves told by astronomy that the account is pretty good. After frantically trying to explain away miracles and reduce the Gospel of Jesus Christ to good old Yankee common sense, here come the scientists warning us not to go too far, suggesting that there is a whole lot more to reality - to the world and the universe and the human spirit than the human mind is capable of comprehending.

In a very difficult but very good essay, German theologian Karl Rahner suggests that we know God when we come to terms with mystery. Listen to his words: "In the midst of the commonsense everyday movement of life, we are constantly faced with the mystery which is infinite...Nameless, always, everywhere, it prevails in our life..." (Meditations on Hope and Love, p.67).

In our own experience we know that at our best, our most profound, our deepest, we are always operating at some level other than cold, rational logic. Creative genius is not often very reasonable: nor am I able to explain in logical terms why the music of J. S. Bach or George Frederick Handel touches something inside me so intensely. David Read asks, with tongue in cheek, if Robert Burns explained anything when he wrote:

> "O my luve's like a red, red rose
> That's newly sprung in June:
> O my luve's like the melodie
> That's sweetly played in tune." (op cit p. 127).

In December of 1956 Thomas Torrance, distinguished Professor of Theology at the University of Edinburgh, and today one of the thinkers out on the edge of the new overlap of science and religion, was driving his family to Somerset village, near Bath, for Christmas. The Russians had just launched Sputnik and so Torrance and his family stopped at Jodrell Bank Observatory and were welcomed by the scientists who knew Professor Torrance's academic credentials. They were impressed with a new radio telescope and with the enthusiasm of the astronomers who "felt they were in contact with the very edge of the created universe..."

Then they proceeded to Somerset to celebrate Christmas. Listen to Dr. Torrance reminisce, twenty-three years later: "I could not get Jodrell Bank out of my mind, and the vast immensities of the cosmos it had opened up for me. Then it broke in on me, with an excitement I have never lost, that in this infant Jesus, born of Mary, there had come among us, none other than the creator of that immeasurable universe, before whom the galaxies of stars were, so to speak, like specks of dust in the palm of his hand. And it is here at Bethlehem, and not at Jodrell Bank in spite of the marvelous discoveries they are making there still, in Jesus, that we really are in touch with the secrets of the universe, not only of its origin, but of its ultimate meaning and end..." (Presbyterian Outlook, 12/11/78).

And thus comes to an end my Christmas sermon, a very modest anthology on the topic of mystery. Each of us, minister - laypeople, confront now something that cannot be explained and should not be explained. A child was born in Bethlehem, a child who was the incarnation of God;a birth which ignites hope for us and for our world; a birth which confirms our instinct that it is better to love and give: a birth which calls out of us greater affection for one another and compassion for those less fortunate: a birth which celebrates a love which surrounds each of us eternally: a birth - a mystery - best expressed, not in scholarly sermons, but in poetry and music: So, let us lift our voices and sing the music: "The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah." But first, listen again to the poetry...

> "And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!'"

Amen.